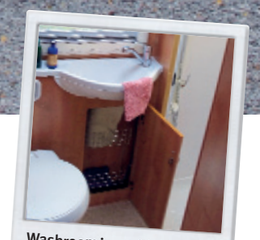
TRAIL BLAZER


Washroom is positively roomy

George Hinton finds little to fault aboard this user-friendly, four-to-six-berth

Vehicle supplied by: Auto-Trail VR Ltd, Trigano House, Genesis Way, Europarc, Grimsby DN37 9TU. Call 01636 704201 or see auto-trail.co.uk

AUTO-TRAIL'S CURRENT brochure (October 2009) states: 'For more than a quarter of a century, the Auto-Trail name has been synonymous with luxury. Our range of top-quality leisure vehicles has a well-deserved reputation for design excellence, functionality and being user-friendly… built on the input of our industry-leading design team and maintained through a close relationship with our customers and members of the Auto-Trail Owners Club alike.'

CONSTRUCTION AND LAYOUT

Certainly, a first look at the 2010 range impresses: all models feature low-energy LED lighting with dimmer switch facility, Seitz S5 flush-fitting windows predominantly accompanied by pleated blinds and flyscreens, dual-fuel cooking, heating and hot water systems, an exterior hot-and-cold shower connection and gas barbecue point, large-bore waste pipes, twin airbags and full-size spare wheel in accessible rear locker.

Underpinning all this is a GRP-skinned body with 40mm insulated walls and 45mm Styrofoam floors with vinyl underside weather protection.

Auto-Trail has also followed Auto-Sleepers by setting up its own in-house aftercare centre and NCC-approved workshop that can carry out both habitation servicing and accident damage repairs. There's even an online parts and accessory shop at autotrail-online.co.uk. We take a closer look at the prototype Apache 725 SE with six-berth option to delve a little deeper.

ON THE ROAD

The two largest Apaches, of which this is one, sit on Fiat's Ducato Maxi 40 Heavy chassis to Camping Car spec, with a Maximum Authorised Weight (MAW) of 4005kg. You therefore need to be certain your driving licence covers you for more than 3500kg vehicles. It's big at 7.38m (24ft 3in) long, of which 2.41m (7ft 11in) is rear axle overhang, but with the Maxi's bigger 16in wheels filling the arches out nicely, it looks just right on the road.

Standard equipment is the 2.3-litre 130bhp engine with six-speed gearbox, the 3.0-litre 160bhp unit, with or without six-speed automatic transmission, being optional. With an unladen weight of virtually 3500kg for the SE spec, which adds recessed 4m awning, cab air-con, home entertainment system and rear-view camera, the 130 horses have to work quite hard, but still get you up to 50mph in 16.8 seconds.

It doesn't feel underpowered, but whether the 3.0-litre would find things easier and prove more economical is open to question, our 19.8mpg being entirely trunk road driving, mostly at 50-65mph. Mileage was only 500 at the start of our test, so you would expect economy to improve with use.

The ride is superb, despite Continental Camping tyres with recommended pressures of 79.5psi all round, helped by the lack of rattles from the rigid body construction and fit-out.

With no rear window, it's handy that, when reverse gear is engaged, the 2.8in colour monitor in the dash radio/CD player switches on within five seconds, giving a close-up view behind, day or night. The cab is smartened with Auto-Trail-branded woodgrain effect décor to the centre console and silver trims for the four air vents. Externally, an Auto-Trail logo replaces the Fiat grille badge.

There are only four seat belts as standard for six berths – two rear-facing lap belts on a steel mounting frame may be specified for £295 extra, including a free layout alteration, changing the L-shape settee to a double dinette.

LIVING ABOARD

The immediate impression is of light – thanks to generous windows and a Heki 3 rooflight – and warmth due to the Acer woodgrain wallboard, which lines the entire vehicle. Headroom is a good 6ft 6½in except in the washroom where you step up 5in (though you step down again into the shower tray).

Turn left for the first-class lounge offering a two-person sofa on the left and L-shape sofa on the right. Five can lounge here in comfort, while the cab seats swivel to provide two extra places.

Dining could be slightly problematic. The 725 is basically a four-berth, with the extra double berth in the Luton a no-cost option. However, the free-standing table supplied, at 36in x 21in, makes it tight for four, let alone six. Maybe a case for the continental-style expanding table design? There's space to have another table and indeed a 55cm (21½in) circular table on a 'boom arm' tubular support is optional (£140). It was not provided but it is shown in the brochure and looks ideal to serve the reversed cab seats.

Storage is the other big question when accommodating six, but the Apache provides plenty of it as both water tanks are below decks, freeing all three seat bases for stowage. There's also the rear bunkroom base, which also has exterior access.

The central rear wardrobe, with automatic light, has four drawers beneath but, without positive catches, these could fly open were you to put anything heavy, such as books, in them.

At night-time, the pleated blinds provide plenty of privacy. The above-locker mood lighting, pioneered by Auto-Trail in the UK and now LED-powered, looks good, but once the main, brighter under-cupboard LED lights are fully on, the former adds little to overall illumination levels. There are no conventional ceiling lamps. Two reading lamps house 15 bright LEDs apiece, while the Luton berth has two directable halogen spotlights and the bunks have a filament bulkhead lamp each at their far ends.

Truma's S3002 5kW convector with Ultraheat is located just aft of the doorway below the angled dresser. The 10-litre Truma boiler is located beneath the bottom bunk, while the front nearside gas locker holds one 13kg plus one 7kg cylinder.

Soft furnishings are in attractive shades of beige with leather-look coffee-colour piping. Upholstery is plump 6in foam and very comfortable for sitting and sleeping on. Substantial anti-condensation panels in woodgrain finish are found beneath both saloon windows, while the wood plank-effect vinyl flooring has honey-beige bound-edge over-carpet in three sections, running into the cab.

The 4 x 35W entertainment system is excellent, with rear stereo speakers as standard, while the through-roof aerial can be adjusted with the TV picture in sight. For other mains power needs, there's a socket facing the cab on the nearside sofa base.

KITCHEN

This is pretty well equipped, the full-size Spinflo Caprice III cooker having one electric disc and three gas burners, >>

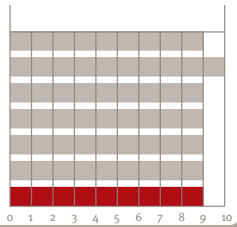
Cab seats swivel in comfy lounge

Transverse double stretches to 6ft 7in

DID YOU KNOW? Auto-Trail organises monthly tours of its Lincolnshire factory

> "The ride is superb, helped by the lack of rattles from the rigid construction"

RATINGS



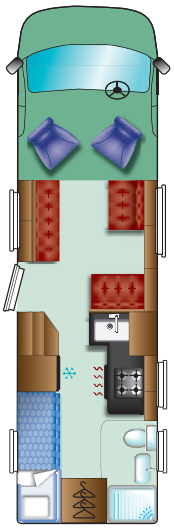
RRP	£47,463 OTR
Engine	2287cc Fiat/Iveco Multijet (3.0-litre 157bhp engine £1810; 3.0-litre plus Comfortmatic auto gearbox £3167)
Power	130bhp (97kW) @ 3600rpm
Torque	236lb/ft (320Nm) @ 2000-3000rpm
Transmission	6-speed manual, FWD
Overall length	7.38m (24ft 3in)
Internal length	5.86m (19ft 3in) from dash; 4.86m (15ft 11½in) behind cab
Overall width	2.72m (8ft 11in) inc mirrors
Overall height	3.05m (10ft)
Max internal height	1.99m (6ft 6½in)
Fuel/econ/tank	Diesel/19.9mpg/17.6gal (80 litres)
Kerbside weight	3495kg (68.7cwt) (inc driver, 90% fuel, 100% water)
MAW	4005kg (78.8cwt)
User payload	510kg (10cwt)
Berths	6
Travel seats	4 (6 opt)
NCC approved	Yes

Club insurance: 0800 028 4809 • Info: auto-trail.co.uk

Kitchen offers plenty of storage space

Four seatbelts as standard

Time to unwind!



with a reasonable amount of worktop either side. The 14in diameter stainless sink, with metal mixer tap, has a small (7½in!) half-moon shaped drainer with loose inset cover in two pieces matching the granite-effect worktop.

There are coated wire fitments for crockery in both roof lockers and a large tambour-doored roof locker above the sink looks designed for a microwave oven, having a 13A socket waiting. There's a second socket in tandem with the light switch and cabin dimmer at the back of the worktop. Kitchen lighting is the only real criticism, the single LED strip above the cooker doing nothing for the sink area.

Two generous low-level cupboards are complemented by two drawers plus a cutlery drawer and there's another huge cupboard above Thetford's 150-litre fridge/freezer. A wind-up roof vent in line with the cooker also has a three-speed two-way fan.

WASHROOM

Open the proper lever-handled door and step up to the heated, carpeted washroom. The flat-topped Thetford C250 toilet, fed from the main tank, gives an extra surface to rest things on with lid closed. The 14in oval basin, in matt stone-effect plastic, is below the large window, which has a shelf and angled mirror above it. Unfortunately, this is so high my wife could not see into it at all! The window is clear, so the blind has to be kept almost-closed for privacy. As the Mini Heki rooflight gives ample light and air, the window is really unnecessary – getting rid of it would allow a large mirrored splashback to be installed.

There's a high-level cupboard beside the mirror and a shelved cupboard below the basin. Other fittings are the towel rail high on the forward-facing wall, tissue holder below and double robe hook on the door, all chrome-finished. Nice thing is, there's space to move without falling over the loo.

To the rear, the one-piece acrylic shower cubicle has a double-fold door, but only a single drain at the rear. A chrome riser rail carries a slim, pencil-type, rub-clean showerhead that gives a good spray without excessive use of water, controlled by a single-lever mixer. Temperature remains stable and the pressure is fine. A small moulded shelf below the mixer is adequate for small bottles of shower gel. The only other fitting is the 30-LED striplight at the back.

SLEEPING

The main saloon bed is a transverse double measuring 6ft 7in x 3ft 8in at the foot, though 5ft 7in at the top.

However, having the L-shape settee that converts to a travel seat makes it a pain to convert to a bed. First you have to pull the two slatted sofa bases towards each other in the aisle, having removed the cushions from the offside. The slatted base that bridges the travel seat footspace is substituted by the longer table, then the cushions can be replaced. Dismantling should be a simple reversal, but the sliding slats of the offside front portion tend to twist, then jam.

The Luton (6ft 7in x 3ft 10in) is easy: pull the sliding base section back to cover the cab cut-out and flop the folded 4in mattress open, at some point having retrieved the alloy access ladder.

Bunks are both adult-sized (6ft x 2ft 3in), with 24in headroom for the top one, 28in for the bottom. Each has its own small window at the opposite end to where the lights are fitted, while the mattresses are comfortable 4in jobs. A second alloy ladder is provided.

VERDICT

Apart from two loose screws, the Apache 725 appeared really well-made and offers many features intended to please the user and make life easier. However, it does need to make a few more concessions to those around 5ft in stature! What did the brochure say again? '... a well-deserved reputation for design excellence, functionality and being user-friendly.' Right on! Well done Auto-Trail.

Bearing in mind the high specification, even with the return to 17.5% VAT, it represents good value for money. ■